

Retiree Activities Office

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RAO Newsletter #2012-7 - March 29, 2012 - MOAA, DOD Witnesses Clash on TRICARE Fees

Wednesday's House Armed Services Military Personnel Subcommittee hearing on defense health programs featured starkly contrasting inputs from DoD and MOAA witnesses.

MOAA Government Relations Director Col. Steve Strobbridge (USAF-Ret) was the only association witness called to testify, and he sat on the same panel with Assistant Secretary of Defense (Health Affairs) Dr. Jonathon Woodson and the Army, Navy and Air Force Surgeons General.

After the Defense witnesses outlined plans for military health programs, including the proposed dramatic increases in TRICARE fees, Strobbridge strongly challenged the fee hikes.

Noting defense leaders' pledge not to impose retirement changes for currently serving people, he asserted, "If keeping faith means no changes for today's troops on retirement, it's breaking faith to raise their retirement health fees by \$2,000. It's the same as a \$2,000 retired pay cut. And if it's breaking faith to change the rules for someone with 1 year of service, it's doubly so for those who already completed 20 or 30."

Addressing why military fees are lower than most civilians pay, Strobbridge said, "When someone gives me that argument, I ask, 'If the military deal is so great, are you willing to pay what they did to earn it? Would you sign up to spend the next 20 years being deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan or any other garden spot the government wants to send you to? Military people already pay far steeper premiums for health coverage than any civilian ever has or ever will.'"

He called the proposed plan to means-test TRICARE fees based on the beneficiary's retired pay patently discriminatory against the military. "No other federal retiree has health benefits means-tested, and it's rare in the civilian world," he said. "Under that perverse system, the longer and more successfully you serve, the lower your health benefit."

Strobbridge also challenged Pentagon leaders for failing in their own responsibility to reform the stove-piped

military healthcare delivery system to make it more efficient. He said the Defense Department's recent review made minimal changes, in part because the decision process gave heavy weight to how hard a change would be. "So the first choice was to make retirees pay more, because it was easier."

Finally, he expressed MOAA's and The Military Coalition's strong objection to the proposal to index TRICARE fees to some measure of health cost growth. "We believe the percentage increase in any year should not exceed the percentage growth in military retired pay," Strobridge said.

Subcommittee members gave every appearance of sharing MOAA's view.

Subcommittee Chairman Joe Wilson (Rep-SC) called the Pentagon fee plan "wrong-headed", and noted the unfairness of having an E-7 with 28 years of service pay more for healthcare than an E-7 with 20 years of service.

"Last year, GAO put out a report indicating there's \$200 billion to \$300 billion spent on redundant and duplicative government programs," observed Rep. Allen West (R-FL). "Why don't we look at that before we start penalizing people who have given a lifetime of service to this country?" Speaking to Dr. Woodson, West said, "You've got to tell [Defense] Secretary Panetta, this is FUBAR."

View a video of the hearing at http://armedservices.granicus.com/MediaPlayer.php?view_id=2&clip_id=57